

Paradoxical leadership: the role of leader emotions and the mediating effect of paradoxical mindset on followers' performance

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Abstract

Purpose – Research on paradoxical leadership, an approach in which leaders exhibit seemingly contradictory yet interdependent behaviors, has gained significant traction in recent years. However, empirical studies on the emotional antecedents and outcomes of paradoxical leadership are rather rare, offering scarce insights into how managers can become paradoxical leaders and how paradoxical leadership affects followers' role-based job performance. To address this gap, this article demonstrates that leaders' positive and negative trait emotions play a pertinent role in being a paradoxical leader and provides evidence that paradoxical leadership has a positive indirect effect on followers' performance through their paradoxical mindset.

Design/methodology/approach – This study surveyed 313 subordinates regarding their leaders' trait affect and paradoxical leadership behaviors as well as the subordinates' own paradoxical mindset and performance, using an online questionnaire. We assessed hypotheses using structural equation modeling.

Findings – We found positive leader trait affect corresponds positively with paradoxical leadership and vice versa for negative leader trait affect. Paradoxical leadership, in turn, stimulates an increase in role-based job performance through the pathway of followers' paradoxical mindset.

Originality/value – Our results contribute to the literature by showing that leaders' emotions are key to unlocking the potential of paradoxical leadership, providing evidence that paradoxical leadership has a positive effect on followers' role-based performance and demonstrating that followers' paradoxical mindset plays an important mediating role between paradoxical leadership and followers' performance.

Keywords Emotions, Paradox, Leadership, Paradoxical leadership, Paradoxical mindset

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Organizations are increasingly being confronted with paradoxes – contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Accordingly, academic interest has grown in this area, with paradox theory providing a particularly valuable framework for leaders to navigate the escalating complexity of our volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world (Lewis and Smith, 2022). In line with this perspective, research on paradoxical leadership (PL), defined by seemingly contradictory yet interrelated behaviors that entail a “both/and” approach to addressing tensions (Zhang et al., 2022), has emerged as a promising strategy for leaders to manage conflicting demands. Rather than focusing solely on one pole, such as empowering or providing autonomy versus being directive and maintaining control (Lorinkova et al., 2013), paradoxical leaders aim to embrace and integrate divergent perspectives into new behavioral strategies that address demands both simultaneously and over time (Zhang et al., 2015).

To date, PL research has placed particular importance on the nature and effects of PL, with articles examining diverse areas such as leaders' traits (Ishaq et al., 2021), sensemaking and sensegiving (Sparr, 2018), contextual factors (Shao et al., 2019) and PL's positive and negative



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outcomes (Zhang *et al.*, 2022; Slesman, 2019). However, while these studies have provided rich insights into the nature of paradoxes and PL's mostly positive outcomes, the question of what drives PL remains largely unanswered. Specifically, to the best of our knowledge, existing research has not directly addressed how leaders' positive and negative emotions affect PL. This is somewhat surprising, as we know that navigating paradox is inherently emotional (Pradies, 2023).

Further, while research on PL has yielded significant insights into its impact on employee outcomes, including proficiency, proactivity and team innovation (Zhang *et al.*, 2015), the question of how PL affects followers' superior performance has not yet been entirely answered. For example, Zhang *et al.* (2015, p. 560) stated that some followers "may be uncomfortable about following the paradoxical leader" and, indeed, some recent studies provide evidence for some negative effects of PL (Shao *et al.*, 2019). As Waldman *et al.* (2019, p. 2) state, "[T]he effects of paradoxical leadership can be either positive or negative," indicating that more research is needed on how PL affects followers' performance.

More specifically, prior research has highlighted the important role of paradoxical mindsets (i.e. the extent to which individuals accept and embrace tensions) in successfully tackling paradoxes (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2018). However, while we know from a recent study that PL positively affects followers' paradoxical mindsets (Boemelburg *et al.*, 2023), current research has not addressed the question of how paradoxical mindsets might mediate the relationship between PL and followers' performance outcomes. Accordingly, our study examines the question of how followers' mindsets affect their reaction to PL (Fürstenberg *et al.*, 2021), with our goals being to better understand the role of emotions in leading paradoxically and to analyze PL's effects on followers' performance outcomes. Further, our study empirically examines the mediating effect of followers' paradoxical mindset in this relationship. With this, we have aimed to advance research on PL's antecedents and outcomes, introducing leader trait affect as a potential facilitator of engaging in PL behaviors and highlighting the crucial role of followers' paradoxical mindset for PL's effectiveness.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Organizations are rife with competing challenges, and their leaders face pressures to address multiple, competing demands simultaneously (Smith, 2014). Paradox theory offers rich insights into these competing challenges (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Zhang *et al.* (2015, p. 538) draw on this theory to introduce the concept of paradoxical leadership behavior, which refers to behaviors that are "contradictory yet interrelated, to meet competing workplace demands simultaneously and over time." Paradoxical leaders are theorized to embrace seemingly opposing demands, engaging in a "both/and" rather than an "either/or" approach (Smith, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2015).

Based on and due to this conceptualization, research on PL has grown exponentially in recent years. Studies have investigated PL in different contexts, encompassing areas such as creativity (Lin *et al.*, 2024) as well as individual and team innovation (Zhang *et al.*, 2022), among others. Studies have also addressed cultural factors, such as the differing mindsets of Eastern and Western individuals (Keller *et al.*, 2017, 2018). However, while a few studies have focused on PL's cognitive antecedents (Zhang *et al.*, 2015), the question of whether and how emotional dimensions relate to leaders' paradoxical behavior in managing people remains mostly unanswered.

Emotions in paradoxical leadership

Emotions in leadership. Leadership is inherently emotional for both leaders and their followers, and studying the importance of affect in leadership is essential to grasp the complexities and intricacies of the leadership process (Shao, 2024). Emotions are a key factor shaping leaders' ability to fulfill their core task of influencing their followers toward attaining shared goals (Walter and Bruch, 2009).

Affect can be differentiated based on its scope of time, with emotions relating more to intense, short-term reactions to certain events or targets; moods describing more mellow and longer-term expressions of affect unrelated to events (Frijda, 1993) and trait affect indicating a general disposition toward repeatedly experiencing certain state emotions (Watson and Clark, 1984). We opted to focus on trait affect for three reasons: Firstly, while leaders' state affect, and particularly their expressions thereof, can shape followers' own affect, motivation, impressions and performance (e.g. Liegl and Furtner, 2024), leader trait affect acts as a more stable and complex predictor for emotional state and long-term outcomes (Watson and Clark, 1984). Secondly, the temporal scope of trait affect matches the scope of PL and paradoxical mindset as well as their potential effects on performance outcomes. Thirdly, while emotional intelligence as a potentially more eminent construct is frequently brought up as an emotion-related trait affecting leaders' behaviors and success (Shao, 2024), the validity of its definition and measurement is heavily disputed (Antonakis et al., 2009; Dasborough et al., 2022). By contrast, trait affect is a more clearly defined construct that can be measured reliably (Watson, 1988; Watson and Clark, 1991) and should, therefore, provide more valid insights.

Overall, positive trait affect is seen as a key predictor for leader success, indicated by positive associations with both leader emergence (and particularly effectiveness) through the pathway of transformational leadership (Shao, 2024) and with CEO creativity (Delgado-García and De La Fuente-Sabaté, 2010; Delgado-García et al., 2010). Negative trait affect, however, is mostly related to the inverse effects of decreased leadership emergence, effectiveness and transformational leadership (Joseph et al., 2015); further, it might be associated with risk aversion (Delgado-García et al., 2010; Delgado-García and De La Fuente-Sabaté, 2010), reduced success and even abusive supervision (e.g. Collins, 2023). Importantly, these effects extend beyond the influence of personality traits (Joseph et al., 2015) and their frequently investigated relationships with leadership styles and effectiveness (e.g. Liegl and Furtner, 2023).

Emotions and paradoxical leadership. While leadership studies have extensively examined the role and importance of emotions in general, limited research has been done on whether and how emotions affect the navigation of paradox. Paradox scholars have begun to call for more research attention specifically on the role of emotions in PL research and highlighted that "scholars need to rethink the role of emotions in contradictions" (Fairhurst et al., 2016, p. 72). Partly in response to that, a recent study qualitatively examined how emotions form the way paradoxes are acknowledged and experienced (Pradies, 2023). However, while that study provides fruitful insights, the author also hopes that "the model presented here inspires further exploration of the emotional dynamics at play in paradox navigation" (Pradies, 2023, p. 547). A study on the effects of neuroticism, which is often associated with a tendency to experience more negative affect and a less positive attitude, indicated this trait coincides with lower perceived PL (Ishaq et al., 2021). However, neither of these studies assessed paradoxical leaders' own affectivity. Only one recent investigation examined leaders' trait anger and anxiety, finding those attributes stimulate attributions of lower transformational leadership and heightened abusive supervision (as one alternative conceptualization of PL) if combined with low fluid intelligence (Collins, 2023); that study did not investigate positive affect. Hence, to shed light on trait affect's role in leading paradoxically, we explore the role of positive and negative trait emotions and their relationship to PL.

Following the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), experiencing positive affect expands one's attentional scope and, thus, the ability to access divergent information. Keeping a holistic and broad attentional focus, reacting flexibly and resiliently to changing and potentially contradictory demands and adapting one's leadership practices accordingly constitute a leader's predisposition to cope with the challenging and paradoxical demands of modern leadership (Zhang et al., 2015; Zhang and Han, 2019). Research supports the connection between positive trait affect and a more emotionally stable personality, cognitive flexibility (Park et al., 2022) and increased resilience (Alessandri et al., 2018). As PL describes

one's tendency to engage openly and flexibly with paradoxes, trait positive affect should, therefore, be a key resource aiding them in doing so. Negative affect, on the other hand, should be associated with a narrower attentional focus (Fredrickson, 2001), less flexibility, and thus, lessened competencies to engage in complex PL practices. Following the broaden-and-build theory, we therefore expect the following relationships:

H1a. Positive leader trait affect has a positive effect on paradoxical leadership.

H1b. Negative leader trait affect has a negative effect on paradoxical leadership.

Next, we detail how PL fosters followers' role-based job performance in terms of additional efforts. First, researchers have consistently argued that through their behaviors, leaders impact followers' work engagement by shaping their working conditions (Sparr *et al.*, 2022). Paradoxical leaders treat followers equally and avoid preferential treatment, which helps followers understand that their specific actions, rather than random personal favors, influence outcomes. However, these leaders simultaneously consider individual desires and talents when assigning tasks, fostering a sense of involvement in work decisions (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). This dual emphasis – on fairness and individualized consideration – cultivates both accountability and engagement, motivating followers to exert effort beyond their formal job requirements. Unlike other leadership styles that may favor either equality or individualization, PL integrates both equality and individualization into a coherent approach. This will positively affect followers' job performance (i.e. additional effort) (Pan, 2021).

Further, paradoxical leaders use their decision-making authority to set specific goals and deadlines and supervise work activities, providing followers with a clear understanding of performance expectations. However, they also allow for flexibility, such as deviations from standard procedures, which enhances followers' sense of influence over how they achieve their work goals (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). While several other leadership styles tend to favor one side of the coin (i.e. autonomy or flexibility) over the other, paradoxical leaders integrate these opposing behavioral elements, creating a clear understanding of performance expectations and flexibility that leads to followers' superior job performance. Based on our considerations, we hypothesize the following:

H2. Paradoxical leadership has a positive effect on followers' job performance.

The mediating role of paradoxical mindset

Drawing on paradox theory, we expect PL to facilitate followers' paradoxical mindsets by delivering different role-based expectations (Sparr *et al.*, 2022). Paradox theory emphasizes that paradoxical leaders are often required to embrace and manage tensions – such as stability versus change or control versus autonomy – as ongoing and interdependent elements of work life (Lewis, 2000). As leaders are central figures for followers at work, their role expectations are an essential mechanism to engage in corresponding work activities. In leading paradoxically, paradoxical leaders embrace tensions and show and deliver seemingly competing work behaviors. They can expect followers to be both flexible and subject to overall control (Zhang *et al.*, 2015). By doing so, followers internalize their responsibilities and behaviors accordingly. Thus, rather than adhering to a singular focus, followers are likely to imitate leaders' behaviors and develop paradoxical mindsets (Yin, 2022).

Prior research has highlighted the pertinent role of followers' paradoxical mindsets, the extent to which one is accepting of and energized by tensions (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2018). In this regard, a mindset can be seen as a lens through which individuals interpret experiences and organize complex realities (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2002). From a paradox perspective, individuals with paradoxical mindsets tend to value and feel comfortable with tensions. We argue that paradoxical mindsets energize followers to increase their job performance and hence mediate the relationship between PL and followers' job performance. With a

paradoxical mindset, followers can grasp their leaders' PL behaviors. Specifically, as researchers have shown that paradoxical mindsets are positively related to PL and appear to enhance performance, we expect paradoxical mindsets to mediate the relationship between PL and followers' job performance. For these reasons, we hypothesize the following:

H3. Paradoxical leadership has an indirect positive relationship with followers' performance through followers' paradoxical mindset.

The full research model, including our hypotheses, is depicted in [Figure 1](#).

Methodology

We acquired data by contacting German-speaking employees working at small, medium, and large organizations in Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, sending them a link to an online questionnaire and requesting their participation. Participants were instructed to rate the leader they were most regularly interacting with in terms of their trait affectivity and PL behaviors as well as their own paradoxical mindset and role-based performance. Additionally, we acquired ratings of the respondents' preferred power distance and relational identity orientation and their sociodemographic data. We directly contacted participants and assured them of their anonymity and that their leaders would not gain access to their data to avoid socially desirable response behavior regarding the leader ratings and performance evaluations as well as reduce the risk of common method bias ([Podsakoff et al., 2024](#)). To further mitigate this issue, we proximally separated predictor and outcome measures by including filler items and control variables between the questionnaire sets ([Weijters et al., 2010](#); [Johnson et al., 2011](#)).

Sample

Our sample consisted of 313 employees (176 female, 136 male, 1 non-binary, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.23$, $SD = 12.51$, range 17–68), predominantly working in the education (16.3%), technology (14.4%), health (13.1%) and finance (12.5%) sectors. In total, 37.4% of the participants were engaged in a managerial role, ranging from lower (13.4%), middle (15.7%) and upper management (6.1%) to owners/partners (2.2%). Participants had a mean working experience of 17.55 years ($SD = 13.45$), and they had been working for their current organization for a mean duration of 9.43 years ($SD = 10.85$) and for their current leader for a mean of 4.14 years ($SD = 5.40$). All participants were subject to a formal leader–follower relationship and provided informed consent.

Measures

Trait affect. Employees rated their leaders' positive and negative trait affectivity on the respective subscale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; [Watson, 1988](#)). This scale is suitable to assess both short-term moods and long-term trait affect ([Watson and Clark, 1991](#); [Watson, 1988](#)), depending on the wording of its instructions, and frequently is utilized to assess leader trait affect (for an overview, see [Joseph et al., 2015](#)). We asked

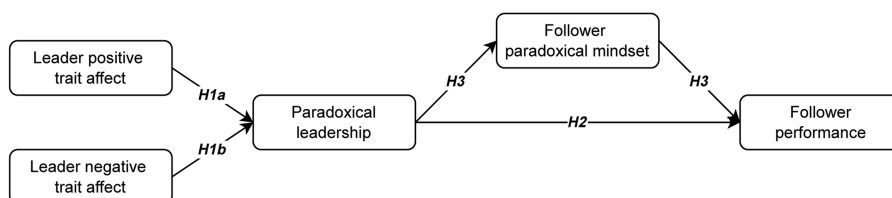


Figure 1. Proposed research model including hypotheses. Source: Authors' work

participants to assess their respective leader's general tendency to display a set of ten positive (e.g. enthusiasm; McDonald's $\omega = 0.88$) and ten negative (e.g. distress; $\omega = 0.81$) emotions. Answers were provided on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*).

Paradoxical leadership. We utilized a 22-item measure of leaders' tendency to engage in PL behaviors (Zhang et al., 2015). This scale consisted of five subscales: treating subordinates uniformly while allowing individualization, combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness, maintaining decision control while allowing autonomy, enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility and maintaining both distance and closeness. The first two subscales consisted of five items each, and the final three had four items each; all of these items were rated on a six-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*). McDonald's omega reliability for the full scale was at $\omega = 0.95$.

Paradoxical mindset. Employees' ability to cope with and accept contradictory and paradoxical demands was assessed using the nine-item paradox mindset scale (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Participants indicated their degree of agreement with statements such as "I am comfortable dealing with conflicting demands at the same time" on a nine-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 9 = *strongly agree*). The scale provided a reliability of $\omega = 0.84$.

Performance. The role-based performance scale (Welbourne et al., 1998) assesses job performance on four items regarding the quantity, quality and accuracy of work output and the customer services provided in the format of "My [quantity/quality/etc.] is ..." We utilized an adapted comparative response scale (Kim and Glomb, 2014), allowing employees to assess their performance in relation to other employees with a similar job on a scale from 1 (*at a very low level compared to other employees*) to 11 (*at a very high level compared to other employees*). This comparative scale format was designed to counteract the potential bias of self-ratings and increase their accuracy (Farh and Dobbins, 1989). The scale provided a reliability of $\omega = 0.82$.

Control variables. Based on the studies conducted by Zhang et al. (2015), we controlled for participants' preference for strong hierarchical structures and clear differentiation between leaders and followers (i.e. power distance; six items, e.g. "Managers should make most decisions without consulting subordinates"; $\omega = 0.85$) (Dorfman and Howell, 1988) as opposed to their wish for close interpersonal relationships (i.e. relational identity orientation; seven items, e.g. "It is important for me to maintain social relations with others"; $\omega = 0.81$) (Vos et al., 2012). Both were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

Data analysis

To assess the fit of our measurement and path model, we calculated chi-square/degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) (sufficient fit ≤ 3 ; good fit ≤ 2), comparative fit index (CFI) (sufficient fit ≥ 0.90 , good fit ≥ 0.95), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) (sufficient fit ≥ 0.90 , good fit ≥ 0.95), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (sufficient fit ≤ 0.08 , good fit ≤ 0.06) and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) (sufficient fit ≤ 0.10 , good fit ≤ 0.08) (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Browne and Cudeck, 1992) based on maximum likelihood estimates in SPSS Amos (version 29). In addition to these indicators of model fit, we further report the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) and the consistent Akaike information criterion (CAIC) as goodness-of-fit measures to directly compare models (Nylund et al., 2007). Lower BIC and CAIC values indicate a better fit, and a difference of BIC values greater than 10 indicates a significant difference between models (Raftery, 1995). We provide results of a confirmatory factor analysis on our measurement model in the [Supplementary Information](#). These analyses confirmed the factorial structure of our measurement model. Furthermore, we conducted Harman's one-factor test to assess the degree of common method bias. Regressing all items on a single factor showed a substantially worse model fit ($\chi^2_{(1430)} = 5411.40$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.78$; CFI = 0.54; TLI = 0.52; RMSEA = 0.09; SRMR = 0.10; BIC = 6043.48; CAIC = 6153.48) than our core model and could only explain 25.59% of variance in the data,

substantially less than the critical threshold of 50% that would indicate substantial common method bias (Fuller *et al.*, 2016). We report standardized coefficients for the structural equation model and computed 95% bias-corrected bootstrapping intervals with 5,000 samples to assess total, direct and indirect effects (Hayes and Scharkow, 2013).

Results

Correlation analyses

Correlation analyses (see Table 1) provided initial support for our hypotheses by confirming a positive relationship between positive leader affect and PL ($r = 0.61, p < 0.001$; Hypothesis 1a) as well as a negative relationship between negative leader affect and PL ($r = -0.39, p < 0.001$; Hypothesis 1b). Furthermore, PL was related to both followers' paradoxical mindset ($r = 0.25, p < 0.001$) and performance ($r = 0.21, p < 0.001$; Hypothesis 2). These relationships were consistent for all subdimensions of PL, except for maintaining distance and closeness not being related to performance (for detailed analyses, see the Supplementary Information, Tables A1 and A2). Lastly, followers' paradoxical mindset was related to their performance ($r = 0.38, p < 0.001$).

Structural equation model

Our proposed structural equation model (see Figure 2) provided mostly acceptable fits to our data ($\chi^2_{(1398)} = 2309.91, p < 0.001, \chi^2/d.f. = 1.65; CFI = 0.89; TLI = 0.89; RMSEA = 0.05; SRMR = 0.07; BIC = 3126.32; CAIC = 3268.32$). In accordance with Hypothesis 1a, positive leader affect was strongly and positively related to the leaders' PL ($\beta = 0.59, p < 0.001$; see Table 2). By contrast, negative leader affect was associated with lower PL ($\beta = -0.34, p < 0.001$), thus supporting Hypothesis 1b. We further expected PL to stimulate increased performance in followers (Hypothesis 2), which was confirmed by our analyses, with a total effect of $\beta = 0.26 (p < 0.001)$. This effect should, however, flow through followers' paradoxical mindset (Hypothesis 3). Our model supports that PL could strengthen followers' paradoxical mindset ($\beta = 0.27, p < 0.001$) and thus increase their performance ($\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$), resulting in an overall significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.10, 95\% CI = 0.05 \text{ to } 0.18$) and a reduced direct effect ($\beta = 0.16, p = 0.041$). Results remained consistent when adding the following control variables to the model: participants' age, gender, years of work experience, organizational affiliation and years working with the leader, as well as power distance and relational identity orientation (see Table 2).

Discussion

In our study, we show that leaders' positive and negative trait emotions play a pertinent role in being a paradoxical leader as well as provide evidence that PL has an indirect positive effect on followers' performance through their paradoxical mindset. Specifically, we find positive leader trait affect corresponds with increased PL (Hypothesis 1a), while negative affect hampers it (Hypothesis 1b). PL, in turn, is associated with increases in followers' role-based performance (Hypothesis 2), though not directly but rather through the pathway of followers' own capacity to cope with paradoxical demands and integrate divergent information, as indicated by their paradoxical mindset (Hypothesis 3). With our results, we contribute to current literature in several ways.

First, our findings on the role of leaders' emotions match previous findings on how positive leader trait affect benefits these leaders' ability to engage in active and effective leadership behaviors (e.g. Joseph *et al.*, 2015) and thus further emphasize leader traits' role as an important factor in successful leadership. Furthermore, these results correspond well with and further support the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), which proposes that positive affect stimulates a broader cognitive scope and attentional focus that facilitates aggregating divergent information, an essential prerequisite for successful PL. Conversely,

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations among the control variables and leaders' trait positive and negative affect, paradoxical leadership, followers' paradoxical mindset and role performance

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Gender male ^a	0.44	0.50														
2. Gender female ^a	0.56	0.50	−0.99***													
3. Gender non-binary ^a	0.00	0.06	−0.05	−0.06												
4. Age	39.23	12.51	0.02	−0.02	−0.03											
5. Work experience (years)	17.55	13.45	0.03	−0.02	−0.07	0.94***										
6. Organizational affiliation (years)	9.43	10.85	0.03	−0.03	−0.04	0.65***	0.68**									
7. Affiliation to the leader (years)	4.14	5.40	0.12*	−0.11*	−0.02	0.40***	0.42***	0.51***								
8. Power distance	2.10	0.83	0.07	−0.07	0.03	0.00	0.06	0.05	0.17**	(0.85)						
9. Relational identity orientation	3.87	0.64	−0.22***	0.23***	−0.05	−0.20***	−0.19***	−0.09	−0.07	−0.14*	(0.81)					
10. Leader positive trait affect	3.46	0.73	−0.02	0.03	−0.09	−0.12*	−0.17**	−0.10	0.04	−0.09	0.11	(0.88)				
11. Leader negative trait affect	2.01	0.63	0.13*	−0.13*	0.01	−0.03	0.02	−0.03	0.01	0.37***	−0.07	−0.20***	(0.81)			
12. Paradoxical leadership	4.23	0.92	0.00	0.01	−0.09	−0.09	−0.13*	−0.06	0.06	−0.07	0.20***	0.61***	−0.39***	(0.95)		
13. Follower paradoxical mindset	6.02	1.35	0.05	−0.05	−0.05	−0.04	−0.07	−0.02	−0.09	−0.05	0.07	0.20***	−0.03	0.25***	(0.85)	
14. Follower role performance	8.37	1.45	0.06	−0.05	−0.04	0.15**	0.15**	0.14*	0.14*	−0.15*	0.03	0.27***	−0.09	0.21***	0.38***	(0.81)

Note(s): *N* = 313. McDonald's omega reliabilities are presented along the diagonal in parentheses, **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01 and ****p* < 0.001, ^aDummy variable (0 = no, 1 = yes)

Source(s): Authors' work

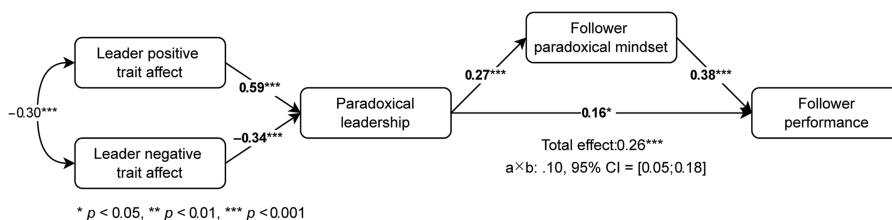


Figure 2. Research model including path coefficients of the structural equation model. Source: Authors' work

Table 2. Results of the structural equation modeling for the base model (Model 1) and the model containing control variables (Model 2)

Variables	Model 1 Paradoxical leadership	Paradoxical mindset	Role performance	Model 2 Paradoxical leadership	Paradoxical mindset	Role performance
<i>Predictors</i>						
Positive leader affect	0.59***			0.57***		
Negative leader affect	-0.34***			-0.43***		
<i>Mediation</i>						
Paradoxical leadership		0.27***	0.16*		0.26***	0.17*
Paradoxical mindset			0.38***			0.38***
Total effect PL → RP			0.26***			0.26**
Indirect effect PL → PM → RP			0.10***			0.10**
<i>Control variables</i>						
Age				0.21	-0.09	-0.11
Gender male ^a				0.10	0.0*	0.01
Gender diverse ^a				-0.04	-0.03	-0.02
Work experience (years)				-0.19	0.02	0.25
Organizational tenure (years)				-0.03	0.12	0.02
Tenure with supervisor (years)				-0.07	-0.06	0.09
Power distance				0.22***	0.02	-0.18**
Relational identity orientation				0.15**	0.07	-0.03
R ²	0.59	0.07	0.20	0.63	0.09	0.27

Note(s): We report standardized estimates. $N = 313$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ and *** $p < 0.001$, ^aDummy variable (0 = no, 1 = yes)

Source(s): Authors' work

negative affect narrows an individual's focus, thus potentially decreasing their ability to cope with complex paradoxical demands, which our analyses supported. Overall, we reinforce the position of leaders' emotions – particularly their trait affectivity – within the field of leadership research and interlace these constructs with PL. Thus, we emphasize that the relationship between leaders' predisposition to experience positive emotions and their leadership success extends to modern PL conceptualizations.

Second, while research on PL's outcomes has gained traction in recent years (e.g. Zhang et al., 2022; Kearney et al., 2019), PL's antecedents have received notably less attention (Lee et al., 2023). Though existing research often follows trait approaches to leadership

(Antonakis *et al.*, 2012), it generally focuses on personality traits (Ishaq *et al.*, 2021) and cognition (Zhang *et al.*, 2015) while only tangentially investigating the role of trait affect (Collins, 2023). However, leaders' emotions are considered one of the most essential predictors of leadership success (Shao, 2024), and the predictive value of trait affect can exceed even that of personality traits (Joseph *et al.*, 2015). We provide initial evidence that both positive and negative trait affect should be considered fundamental antecedents of PL, with these factors shaping PL in the direction of their respective valence. Leaders showing a general tendency to experience positive affect might possess an essential prerequisite to engaging in paradox behaviors. Considering not only personality traits (Ishaq *et al.*, 2021), cognitive capabilities and structural context factors (Zhang *et al.*, 2015) but also leaders' affectivity will allow us to gain more holistic insights into the antecedents of PL.

Third, our research extends the literature on paradoxical mindsets and enriches our understanding by showing the complex and interrelated mechanisms among leaders' PL, followers' paradoxical mindsets and improved performance. Specifically, it discloses that leaders can promote paradoxical mindsets among their individual followers by taking a "both/and" approach to competing demands. Such a leadership approach enhances individuals' paradoxical mindset and, in turn, performance. With this finding, we address the ongoing debate in paradox literature on how followers' mindsets affect how followers react to PL (Fürstenberg *et al.*, 2021). Relatedly, by showing the partial mediation of followers' paradoxical mindset in the relationship between PL and employees' superior performance, we contribute to the literature by showing that paradoxical mindsets cannot be acknowledged solely as outcomes (Boemelburg *et al.*, 2023) or moderators (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2018); they are also underlying mechanisms in the PL–performance relationship. These findings are also highly relevant from a practical perspective, indicating that organizations should encourage leaders to embrace tensions rather than choose between extremes to foster individuals' paradoxical mindsets (Miron-Spektor *et al.*, 2018).

Fourth, by providing evidence that PL positively affects followers' job performance, we support paradox theory, which posits that effective leadership requires combining seemingly opposing, yet ultimately complementary, behavioral strategies (Smith and Lewis, 2011). In particular, by operationalizing our performance dimension as a relative construct, our study suggests that PL benefits followers by fostering their additional efforts compared to their peers.

Finally, our study has major practical implications. By providing evidence that positive and negative emotions play an important role in PL, we encourage leaders and practitioners to both regulate emotions and embrace contradictions rather than avoid them. Specifically, leaders with a predisposition for negative affect should be careful to frame paradoxes positively as an opportunity for growth; otherwise, these leaders' negative emotions might hinder their ability to effectively cope with tensions, thus potentially eliciting a spiral of increasingly negative affect directed at paradoxes alongside an increasing difficulty in engaging in PL. Conversely, viewing paradoxes in a positive light might provide leaders with the cognitive flexibility and openness to engage in "both/and" practices and thus benefit their organizations. Further, as paradoxical mindsets enable leaders to hold opposing elements simultaneously, these leaders can flexibly adapt to dynamic, volatile and complex environments. Leaders who successfully manage paradoxes enhance both team cohesion and individual adaptability, leading to improved decision-making and individual and organizational performance. Hence, we encourage leaders and organizations (1) to accept and embrace tensions; (2) to give clear instructions and set priorities, but also create space for participation through delegation and (3) to show empathy while remaining rational in difficult decisions. Specific PL programs or certificates, such as the Management of Paradox Indicator (MPI) by Lotte Lüscher, could provide opportunities for organizations to develop leaders who are more emotionally robust, innovative, adaptable and prepared for the challenges of an uncertain future.

Limitations and future research

Methodological and theoretical limitations must be considered when interpreting our findings. One potential methodological concern is that we collected data from a single source utilizing a common method, and we focused on the followers' perspective in our investigation. We could not detect substantial common method bias, and the PANAS is a viable peer-rated measure of trait affect (Watson and Clark, 1991); additionally, the PL scale was conceptualized with subordinate ratings in mind (Zhang *et al.*, 2015), and our performance measure was designed to reduce bias (Kim and Glomb, 2014). However, we cannot fully rule out the presence of single-source and common method bias, which could mitigate the interpretability and generalizability of our findings. Multi-source, multi-method studies utilizing both leaders and followers as sources for self- and observer ratings could overcome these potential issues (for further approaches to mitigating common method bias, see Podsakoff *et al.* (2003, 2024)), allowing for introspective insights into leaders' trait affectivity and thus potentially advancing our understanding of how emotions shape PL at the group or organizational level. Furthermore, our cross-sectional design does not allow for causal claims. Future research should conduct longitudinal and experimental investigations to produce causal evidence for our theoretical model.

A further methodological limitation is that we asked our participants about paradoxes (i.e. PL and paradoxical mindsets) occurring at one specific point in time. There is an ongoing discussion on whether paradoxes are fixed or dynamically evolve over time, and researchers in future studies could provide evidence on how the navigation of paradoxes evolves (Lewis and Smith, 2022). In particular, it would be interesting to observe if some paradoxical relationships persist and/or become latent, as well as if others become/stay salient over time.

Turning to the theoretical level, our study relied on the well-established PL scale developed by Zhang *et al.* (2015). However, future studies could use different conceptualizations of PL to further ensure the robustness and generalizability of our findings. For example, they could examine whether and how the combination of contradictory leadership styles, such as visionary versus empowering leadership (Kearney *et al.*, 2019), relate to leaders' emotional traits and affect followers' performance outcomes as well as investigate what role paradoxical mindsets play in this regard. Additionally, the role of alternative affective employee-related mechanisms in the indirect effect of paradoxical mindset or cultural differences could extend our model in future investigations. This could include, for example, examining whether and how national culture shapes individuals' subjective experience of tensions as well as how individuals use paradoxical frames (Keller *et al.*, 2017, 2018). Specifically, previous research suggests that East Asian individuals are more inclined to hold a paradox mindset than their Western counterparts, meaning the mediating effect of paradoxical mindsets is more pronounced for the Western population. Furthermore, while the experience of positive and negative affect should be universal, the expression of observer judgments – and consequently, their validity – is shaped by cultural context (Elfenbein, 2023). Hence, future studies could test the generalizability of our findings in different cultures and analyze if cultural differences also hold true in the PL context.

Lastly, we focused specifically on the role of positive and negative trait affect as an antecedent for PL. Consequently, we based our theorizing on the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), expecting positive affect to relate to an expanded attentional focus and, thus, a heightened capacity to cope with competing demands in a paradoxical manner as well as the inverse result for negative affect. While this differentiation between valences of affect is the most common approach in leadership science, particularly for investigating trait affect (e.g. Joseph *et al.*, 2015; Shao, 2024), emotions can also be differentiated in terms of their motivational intensity (i.e. their arousal level; Russell, 1980). This additional dimension could extend the broaden-and-build theory, explaining how arousal might modulate the relationship between affect and PL. Emotions high in arousal could narrow the attentional focus, hampering PL, while those low in arousal might broaden it, facilitating leaders engaging in PL, irrespective of the emotions' valence (e.g. Harmon-Jones *et al.*, 2013; Hoffmann *et al.*, 2022).

As this perspective is most applicable to affective states, future research could investigate the role of emotional arousal and state affect as antecedents for PL behaviors.

Conclusion

This study investigated the emotional antecedents of PL, as well as its effects on followers' role-based performance through the mediating pathway of paradoxical mindset. With this, we have provided three core contributions to research and practice. First, we have shown that leaders' trait emotions are key in unlocking PL's potential. With this finding, we contribute to the literature by arguing that next to cognitive antecedents, emotions play an essential role in leading paradoxically. Second, we provide evidence that PL has a positive effect on followers' role-based job performance. This is crucial, as prior research has shown that PL may not have uniform effects across all outcomes. Finally, by demonstrating that followers' paradoxical mindset mediates the relationship between PL and followers' performance, our findings indicate that paradoxical leaders have a sustainable influence on followers' paradoxical thinking and its performance outcomes, and we thereby contribute to the discussion on the linear conceptualizations of mindset and leadership within paradox research. Overall, our results highlight the importance of cognitive flexibility on both the leaders' and followers' side for effective PL. We hope that these findings inspire future studies to delve further into the complex relationships among emotions, PL and individual- and organizational-level performance outcomes.

Supplementary material

Confirmatory factor analysis

First, to assess our measurement model, we conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). The base model, assigning each item to its respective latent factor as proposed by the scale validations, including the second-order subfacets of paradoxical leadership (Zhang *et al.*, 2015) provided the best fit for our data ($\chi^2_{(1394)} = 2297.04$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/d.f. = 1.65$; $CFI = 0.90$; $TLI = 0.89$; $RMSEA = 0.05$; $SRMR = 0.07$; $BIC = 3136.46$; $CAIC = 3282.46$). It further outperformed a model combining both dimensions of leader affect to a single factor ($\chi^2_{(1398)} = 2731.80$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/d.f. = 1.95$; $CFI = 0.85$; $TLI = 0.84$; $RMSEA = 0.06$; $SRMR = 0.08$; $BIC = 3548.21$; $CAIC = 3690.21$), a model combining all leader variables (i.e., affect and PL; $\chi^2_{(1401)} = 2963.05$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/d.f. = 2.12$; $CFI = 0.82$; $TLI = 0.81$; $RMSEA = 0.06$; $SRMR = 0.08$; $BIC = 3762.22$; $CAIC = 3901.22$), and a model combining the follower variables (i.e., their paradoxical mindset and performance; $\chi^2_{(1398)} = 2608.13$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/d.f. = 1.87$; $CFI = 0.86$; $TLI = 0.85$; $RMSEA = 0.05$; $SRMR = 0.07$; $BIC = 3424.54$; $CAIC = 3566.54$).

Table A1. Means, standard deviations, and Pearson product-moment correlations among leaders' positive and negative affect, the subdimensions of paradoxical leadership, followers' paradoxical mindset and performance

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Leader positive trait affect	3.46	0.73								
2. Leader negative trait affect	2.01	0.63	−0.20***							
3. PL Uniformity and individualization	4.30	1.11	0.54***	−0.39***						
4. PL Self- and other-centeredness	4.17	1.04	0.59***	−0.35***	0.73***					
5. PL Decision control and autonomy	4.34	1.09	0.53***	−0.31***	0.60***	0.69***				
6. PL Work requirements and flexibility	4.21	1.06	0.48***	−0.33***	0.64***	0.70***	0.71**			
7. PL Distance and closeness	4.17	1.08	0.43***	−0.28***	0.60***	0.64***	0.57***	0.70***		
8. Follower paradoxical mindset	6.02	1.35	0.20***	−0.03	0.23***	0.24***	0.12*	0.22***	0.23***	
9. Follower role performance	8.37	1.45	0.27***	−0.09	0.18**	0.20***	0.24***	0.16**	0.10	0.38***

Note(s): *N* = 313
 p* < 0.05, *p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001
Source(s): Authors' work

Table A2. Results of linear regression analyses for the subdimensions of paradoxical leadership on paradoxical mindset and role-based performance

Variables	Paradoxical mindset	Role performance
PL Uniformity and individualization	0.11	0.06
PL Self- and other-centeredness	0.14	0.09
PL Decision control and autonomy	−0.17	0.22*
PL Work requirements and flexibility	0.10	−0.02
PL Distance and closeness	0.10	−0.11
R ²	0.08	0.07
F-statistic (df = 5)	5.45***	4.43***
Note(s): We report standardized coefficients. N = 313 *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001		
Source(s): Authors' work		

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